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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the four major activities of the political learning project carried out at the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning. These four activities are (1) a survey of recent empirical work of the content, sequence, and causes of political concept and attitude development, (2) a pilot experiment with second- and fourth-grade children in which a number of basic political concepts, used by professional political scientists, are introduced earlier than is normal in the school curriculum, (3) a survey of pre- and post-adolescent political concept and attitude development focusing in particular upon aggregate age trends, parent-child correspondences, black/white comparison, and multivariate assessment of the relative impact of 11 causal factors, and (4) completion of data analysis on a project concerned with political learning in Grades 2-8. (Author/LH)

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TERMINAL REPORT FROM THE POLITICAL LEARNING PROJECT

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The Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning focuses on contributing to a better understanding of cognitive learning by children and youth and to the improvement of related educational practices. The strategy for research and development is comprehensive. It includes basic research to generate new knowledge about the conditions and processes of learning and about the processes of instruction, and the subsequent development of research-based instructional materials, many of which are designed for use by teachers and others for use by students. These materials are tested and refined in school settings. Throughout these operations behavioral scientists, curriculum experts, academic scholars, and school people interact, insuring that the results of Center activities are based soundly on knowledge of subject matter and cognitive learning and that they are applied to the improvement of educational practice.

This Technical Report is from the Concepts in Political Science Project from Program 2. General objectives of the program are to establish rationale and strategies for developing instructional systems, to identify sequences of concepts and cognitive skills, to develop assessment procedures for these concepts and skills, to identify or develop instructional materials associated with the concepts and cognitive skills, and to generate new knowledge about instructional procedures. Contributing to the program objectives, the Concepts in the Political Science Project focused on the identification of appropriate grade levels and instructional methods for the instruction of citizenship concepts. This terminal Technical Report summarizes the activities of the project during the time it was in the Center from September 1964 to August 1967.

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PREFACE

Any successful project rests upon the sufferance and cooperation of a number of people who are willing to let the investigator go about his business, or who facilitate his doing so. Where interdisciplinary research is involved, cooperation is especially important. Present day disciplinary specialization in the social and behavioral sciences is such that the political scientist and the educational psychologist have grave difficulty in understanding what each other is about, to say nothing of understanding why each other's research could possibly be relevant or worth spending scarce resources for. Each operates within the professionally reinforced, narrow corridors of his own disciplinary criteria of relevance. And the danger is that important social questions—such as the nature of learning about the social and political world before adulthood—will fall between two stools, or will be so tangentially approached by members of a single specialty that little comprehensive knowledge accumulates.

It is testimony to a special, but perhaps all too rare, forebearance among disciplines, therefore, that the present set of projects was allowed to exist at all—in that it was carried out by a political scientist, but with the guidance and sponsorship of educational psychologists. The methods, theories, criteria of relevance, mode of reportage of results, and even habits of work are sufficiently dissimilar to make such cooperation ordinarily uncomfortable, if not impossible. But in the end, understanding of how new members of society develop cognitive maps and attitudinal referents to guide them in an increasingly complex social world depends both upon the contributions of subject-matter specialists and upon those who develop theories of learning and instruction. The one will only give a partial view of reality without the other.

1
INTRODUCTION

The project summarized in this report concerns a number of problems pertaining to the content, sequence, and causes of political learning among American school children. Four major activities were devoted to the illumination of these problems during the period of the project. These are:

(1) A survey of extant work of relevance to further empirical study of these problems.
(2) An experiment in the early introduction of political science concepts into the second and fourth grade curriculum in Northbrook, Illinois.
(3) A survey of the content, sequence and causal circumstances pertaining to political learning of fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
(4) Completion of analyses of data relevant to the above, collected earlier with David Easton.

In order to see how each of these activities contributed to the more general effort of understanding the processes of political learning, it is necessary to look at them in more detail.

SURVEY OF POLITICAL LEARNING RESEARCH

The first task undertaken was to review the state of knowledge on political learning (or, as it is more familiarly known by in political science, "political socialization"). Two steps were involved in this review. First, a bibliography of relevant published and unpublished writings was created. Secondly, after reviewing these works, an analysis was made of the major analytical and empirical problems of the field.

EXPERIMENT IN POLITICAL CONCEPT LEARNING

The second activity consisted of an attempt to apply what was known, after reviewing the literature, to an area of curriculum experimentation. Taking the findings on elementary school children's patterns of political development as a descriptive base, the experiment focused upon the question of whether or not earlier than normal introduction of political concepts into the curriculum was feasible. In particular, the experimental treatment consisted of a series of lectures and role-playing activities pertaining to some basic concepts such as government, political parties, lawmaking, etc. The outcome of greatest interest was the extent to which children in Grades 2 and 4 could assimilate and make use of these concepts prior to the period of more normal introduction to them in the middle grades of elementary school.

MILWAUKEE SURVEY OF PRE- AND POST-ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

As a second line of extension from the empirical propositions established by the extant political socialization literature, a survey spanning fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades was carried out to test hypotheses of several types. First, attention was given to the issue about whether basic political learning is for all practical purposes completed by early adolescence or not. Here the problem was to test whether the aggregate change of orientation between Grades 5 and 8 was greater, the same, or less than that between Grades 8 and 11. Secondly, attention was given to the extent and direction of parental transmission of political orientations,

following the earlier work of Hyman and of Jennings and Niemi.[1] Thirdly, the special problem of the extent of differences between racial groups in patterns of political learning was considered. And finally, a set of eleven independent or causal variables was assessed as to their relative importance for explaining the development of political orientations of various types at each of the three grade levels. These included social structural, psychological, and family and school interaction variables.

[1] Hyman, Herbert H., Political Socialization (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959); Jennings, M. Kent, and Richard, Niemi. "The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child," American Political Science Review, Vol. 62 (1968), pp. 169-184.

OTHER RELATED DATA ANALYSIS

Concomitant with these three activities, analysis of data collected prior to the beginning of the project was carried out—in order to provide information for the investigations more central to the project's funding. Here the major questions related to description of the typical learning curves of elementary and intermediate school children (Grades 2–8) in the area of concepts and attitudes toward political authorities and self-participant roles.

II
METHODS

In general, the usual methods of bibliographic exploration, survey research and educational experimentation were used. By activity, these break down as follows:

SURVEY OF POLITICAL LEARNING RESEARCH

This project relied upon library reference systems in part and upon mail questionnaires to the set of known, active researchers in the field of political socialization. A number of journals, indexes, and other references were used initially to trace works of relevance to the empirical study of political socialization. Secondly, scholars who had recently published works in the field or who were known to be in process of carrying out research were surveyed not only for more precise information about published and forthcoming work, but also to obtain further references of works and scholars, which in successive waves were themselves surveyed.

EXPERIMENT IN POLITICAL CONCEPT LEARNING

The methods used in the sub-project were those common to experimental educational psychology. Interviews with members of four grade school classes in a middle-class suburb of Chicago were conducted both before and after the administration of the treatment to the experimental groups. The groups consisted of one experimental and one control class at each of two grades, 2 and 4. The treatment consisted of three weeks' daily instruction in a set of basic political concepts, together with related role-playing activities like division of the class into political parties, making specific, class-related political decisions, and participating in a straw ballot on the then-current Presidential election. From the coded interviews change scores were computed to assess the relative effects of the instruction.

MILWAUKEE SURVEY OF PRE- AND POST-ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

Survey methodology was employed in this phase of the overall project. An area cluster probability sample of housing units in the city of Milwaukee was obtained, with screening for fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders. These respondents (N = 297) [plus one parent in each case where this was possible, N = 205] were interviewed by staff of the University of Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory. Data analysis techniques employed were cross-tabulation (e.g., by age and race), factor analysis, and multiple correlation and regression.

OTHER RELATED DATA ANALYSIS

The same kinds of data analysis techniques were employed in the preparation of reports on the questionnaire responses of 12,052 white public school children in eight metropolitan areas of the United States, collected prior to the present project. These children, of both working- and middle-class origins, answered questionnaires read out to them by project staff during regular class periods.

III
FINDINGS

SURVEY OF POLITICAL LEARNING RESEARCH

Two kinds of products issued from the review of existing work on political learning. One was a bibliography of published and forthcoming works pertaining to political learning and socialization. The second was a theoretical survey of the major problems of the field. Both are reported by Dennis.[2] A more extended version of the survey of major problems appears in "Major Problems of Political Socialization Research," Midwest Journal of Political Science, Vol. 12 (1968), pp. 85-114. Ten major problem areas were identified from an analysis of existing and projected work: (1) System-relevance of political socialization, (2) Content, (3) Maturation, (4) Generational variation, (5) Cross-cultural variation, (6) Group differences, (7) The learning process, (8) The agencies, (9) Extent, and (10) Specialized political socialization.

EXPERIMENT IN POLITICAL CONCEPT LEARNING

It was found that concepts of the type introduced were amenable to understanding of both second and fourth graders; and that the second graders showed most positive change.[3] Thus, the hypothesis of Bruner that earlier learning of basic disciplinary concepts can be successful is not disconfirmed by these data.[4]

MILWAUKEE SURVEY OF PRE- AND POST-ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

The data revealed the following: (1) There is substantial growth of political orientations in the aggregate after Grade 8, even though this is more uniformly cognitive than attitudinal; and it is probably not as great as between Grades 5 and 8. (2) There is mainly positive, but low, correlation between parents and their children on a number of basic political orientations. The values of these correlations are generally lower than .5, and some are negative (on certain types of participant orientations). (3) Negro and white differences are two-fold: (a) whites, with some specific item exceptions, lead blacks slightly in the level of supportive political attitudes over the grades, and (b) blacks are more affected by parental political attitudes on the whole, but such transmission is both positive and negative. (4) When each of a set of 11 independent variables including sex, race, parent's education, prestige of parent's occupation, parent's political attitudes, child's perceived family political communication, efficacy of the child in family decision-making, child's perceived school political communication, efficacy of the child in school decision-making, child's ego strength or assertiveness, and child's confidence in his external environment, is correlated with each of nine political attitude indexes pertaining to the child (while controlling in each case for the effects of the other independent variables),

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[2] Dennis, Jack, "A Survey and Bibliography of Contemporary Research on Political Learning and Socialization," Theoretical Paper from the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning, University of Wisconsin, 1967, No. 8.

[3] Dennis, Jack, Keith R. Billingsley, and Sondra J. Thorsen, "A Pilot Experiment in Early Childhood Political Learning," Technical Report from the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning, University of Wisconsin, 1968, No. 63.

[4] Bruner, Jerome, The Process of Education, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1960).

the effects are found to be specific to particular areas of content and grade levels. Some, like confidence in the external environment, show a more consistent relationship with other variables, whereas others, like sex, are relatively negligible in frequency of significant correlation.[5]

OTHER RELATED DATA ANALYSIS

Findings from the prior data on childhood political learning are that very great changes —both cognitive and affective—occur in the grade span, 2 to 8. In particular, the child develops understanding about the nature and roles of political authorities and about his own future role in the political system in these years.[6]

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[5] Dennis, Jack, "Political Learning in Childhood and Adolescence: A study of Fifth, Eighth, and Eleventh graders in Milwaukee, Wisconsin," Technical Report from the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning, University of Wisconsin, 1969 (in press).

[6] Easton, David, and Jack Dennis, "The Child's Political World," Report to the U. S. Office of Education, 1968; in Children in the Political System (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969. Also see (by the same authors): "The Child's Image of Government," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 361 (1965), pp. 40-57, and "The Child's Acquisition of Regime Norms: Political Efficacy," The American Political Science Review, Vol. 61 (1967), pp. 25-38.

IV
CONCLUSION

The conclusions one reaches through these various activities are manifold and they have to do mainly with the possibilities of future research. Each attempt to probe into relatively unknown scholarly terrain raises a new set of questions, while modifying what had been accepted knowledge. All of these activities have been organized around the theme of advancing knowledge of the content sequence and causes of political learning as it proceeds in contemporary America. In each case, a series of small steps have been taken which will offer some guideposts for later exploration.

The field of social studies education might be one fairly direct beneficiary of such research. When typical learning patterns in this area have been described, one can then usefully proceed to explication of causes and to the creation of improved teaching practices. Without such guidance, innovation in curricular practice goes on in a vacuum of description of norms of development, which may make it relatively pointless, in that it is of unknown possible consequence.[7]

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[7] For an attempt to apply such findings as those presented in these several sub-projects, see John J. Patrick, Political Socialization of American Youth: Implications for Secondary School Social Studies (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1967).

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